



Criticism

Volume 50
Issue 1 *Disco*

Article 1

2008

Preface

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Recommended Citation

Flatley, Jonathan and Grusin, Richard (2008) "Preface," *Criticism*: Vol. 50: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol50/iss1/1>

PREFACE

We are basically inclined to agree with Walter Benjamin's assertion that "the vocation of a journal is to proclaim the spirit of its age. Relevance to the present is more important even than unity or clarity." As the new editors of *Criticism*, we are less interested in establishing a coherent program or intellectual project for the journal than we are in the publication of work that displays an active engagement with and representation of contemporary thought and criticism. What texts, concepts, concerns, problems, questions, and arguments are presently motivating intellectual projects? What seems useful, exciting, or troublesome? What new forms is critical thought taking? This commitment to the contemporary does not mean we want only to publish articles about the present moment. Indeed, as we know, and as Benjamin argued, it is often images from the past that can most effectively illuminate the present moment in its specificity.

But to be contemporary in an age of digital mediation does not mean the same thing it meant in an age of mechanical reproduction, when a journal was (short of a newspaper) perhaps the most timely medium for the publication of critical thought. Today, "relevance to the present" is often seen as the province of the Internet, where blogs, social networking sites, and online publications facilitate new forms and intensities of contemporaneity. So if presentness or temporal immediacy tends now to be the province of digital media, what does it mean for a print journal "to proclaim the spirit of its age," especially insofar as print journals today are most often accessed through digital formats?

One thing it means for us is a return to the journal's initial incarnation as "A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts." This issue marks the journal's fiftieth year of publication. While a glance back at volumes of the journal from its early years shows that each issue usually contained articles on the visual arts and music as well as literature, that multi-media emphasis has been less present in recent years. Even as new digital technologies have

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fostered more conversation between media and genres in the present moment, we find very few journals interested in representing thought in and across the various media.

Inaugurating volume 50 with a special issue on a nonliterary topic seemed to be a good way to indicate our commitment to “the Arts.” Special issues are an excellent way for a print journal to represent current thinking as it develops, providing a kind of middle-range perspective between the day-to-dayness of the Internet and the more measured time frame of academic monographs. As we were beginning to think about *Criticism*, over the course of several weeks we ran into a few people who were writing on the topic of disco, or who knew people who were. We thought it might be a good idea to seize on this interest and put together a cluster of essays or a special issue on disco. Charles Kronengold, a former colleague at Wayne State (now at Stanford), is a music scholar also working on disco, and we asked him to help coedit (and contribute to) the issue. The resulting number, which also addresses the visual arts and digital culture, exemplifies our approach to the journal.

Another way for a print journal to be responsive to the present moment is to provide a forum for pieces that work against the brevity and pace of networked digital culture: interviews, artist projects, artist statements, manifestos, various kinds of visual material, longer essays that might not find another journal home, and, indeed, whatever else people have a mind to produce. Thus in the second issue of volume 50 we publish a very lengthy piece by Fred Moten. We intend in the future to be open to similarly long pieces, as well as to shorter pieces that might fall between a journal article and a blog entry. We plan to re-expand the reviews section to include a number of short reviews along with the review forum and the review essay formats that previous editor Cannon Schmitt introduced. Furthermore, we plan to review more than books. In 50.1, for example, we publish a review of the conference “Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope . . . A Conference on Political Feeling.” We also look forward to publishing reviews of exhibits and performances as appropriate. As you can see, we hope to publish a variety of kinds of critical writing, beyond the standard journal essay.

Finally, you will notice that we have redesigned the journal, to debut with this first issue of volume 50. We are pleased that the new design represents our recommitment to the visual; we hope that you find it pleasing, too.

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